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ABSTRACT

This paper offers some guidelines, to be shared with students, that can help make the evaluation of creative responses and projects affirmative, honest, and heartfelt. What should teachers look for in a creative project? The project should move the audience in some deeply personal way, contain some element of surprise, and fulfill the spirit--if not the letter--of the assignment. There are many ways whereby a student may conform to requirements for documentation, background reading, research, or a thorough knowledge of the subject, and still produce a major creative effort. However, students should not be encouraged to work on projects that the teacher is not qualified to evaluate. Collaboration with a teacher in another field may widen the scope of possible creative activities. When making any assignment, it is necessary to be very clear about expectations and criteria for assessment, using a written set of guidelines. Alternately, an entirely different set of guidelines may be developed for creative papers. It is crucial to remember that students who choose to write creative papers generally work harder and longer than others because of a commitment of self, the heart's passion or pain, the mind's light or dark humor. If the ability of the paper to move the audience is used as the primary evaluation criterion, then the response is at the appropriate level. If that magic does not happen, it can generally be explained to the student, in ways that will not crush or blight the imagination, where or how the project could be improved. Two creative writing projects that illustrate how to approach such material are described. (SR)

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November 18, 1990

Applause, Applause: Evaluating Creative Responses and Projects

If you'll think about the last time you spontaneously burst into applause for some performance, you'll get to the heart of what I want to say about evaluation of creative projects. Applause is a deeply felt personal response: it affirms not only the creativity of the performance, but also the smoothness with which the performance is carried off. Applause is also an act of love. It says, I know you value me by the time you spent producing your very best work. I am returning that love and acknowledging your time, energy, intelligence, and willingness to take a risk.

But for all the times that our applause is heartfelt and genuine, there are an equal number of occasions that our applause is perfunctory and merely polite. What I hope to suggest to you today are guidelines that we can share with students so that when the time for evaluation comes, our applause can be affirmative, honest, and heartfelt.

What should we look for in the creative project? Nearly every colleague I have spoken to about this topic says that the most important quality of a good project is originality or heart. One colleague said, "If it moves me, then I know it is good." We might remember a response Emily Dickinson made in a letter to Higginson: "If I read a book and it makes my body so cold that no fire can warm me, I know that is poetry. If I feel physically as if the top of my

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head were taken off, I know that is poetry. These are the only ways I know it. Are there any other ways?" Dickinson's remark touches the core of evaluation. A good project, because of its passion or uniqueness, will move us in some deeply personal way: to laughter or tears, to excitement or possibly depression. We must trust these personal responses, because they are basic to the functions of art to please, teach, and move, the ability to move being positioned as the highest possible end. A good project should first and foremost move the audience.

Another respected colleague said he looked for some element of the outrageous or bizarre, which can be embodied in either the content or the form of the project. This new perspective must emerge from the student's unique view of the world, and although as instructors we might suggest all sorts of techniques for tapping into original ideas, ultimately, really fine projects must strike us with some element of surprise. The student can't be working with our ideas, but rather with his or her own fresh visions. Nearly every instructor whose opinion I polled on the question of evaluation said that the ability of a project to move or surprise its audience is the single most important factor in the grade, counting for up to ninety percent of an instructor's evaluation.

Obviously, the ability to move another is not a guaranteed condition. And this brings me to a related, but most important, point. Risk is a major factor in any creative project. The student is risking a lot by going off the beaten path of a guaranteed grade. Living with fear is often the element that propels student's into higher acts of the imagination. In fact, that fear should be embraced rather than

ignored. Although the willingness to take a risk should not be part of the grade, it is a significant element in the ultimate payoff. Nearly every student of mine who has turned in a successful creative project has been worried sick until receiving the final grade over whether I would like it or not. This healthy fear teaches students to live with real world audiences, whose love and approval can be fickle indeed, and whose tastes change from season to season.

Another aspect to consider in evaluation is appropriateness. How well does the project illustrate the student's essential understanding of an idea or literary work? Does the project reflect the student's knowledge of a primary source? Has the student invested an equivalent amount of time as he or she would in a traditional paper, or is the project simply a way out of some hard work? Here I would like to share some personal advice and experience based on twenty years of encouraging creative projects.

First, don't encourage students to work on projects that you are not qualified to evaluate. For me, this meant giving up projects that involved art. Although I have received a few very wonderful series of prints, including a fabulous series based on cantos from Dante's *Inferno*, I have received far too many projects, including Greek masks, needlepoint maps of the ancient world, or drawings of the shield of Achilles, that I felt represented mere busy work rather than exercises of the imagination. In addition, the response to art is very subjective, and what appears to me to be C work might in another more qualified evaluator's eyes be a D or B. Ultimately, I have never felt that I was being fair to a student when I was put in a position of judging art projects. If you can work in collaboration with

an art instructor, or you have implicit faith in your own abilities to judge, then evaluation takes on a different dimension and one can continue to encourage artistic responses. One might couple the art project with a written journal documenting the process of making the artistic work. Then the evaluation would be at least partially based on written work. I, however, now require that all creative responses be written.

Second, when making **any** assignment, be very clear with students about your own expectations and criteria for assessment. This means handing out a written set of guidelines that students can consult while working on the project. A creative response may fulfill the spirit rather than the letter of the guidelines, but at least the student who takes a major leap will be aware of what you are looking for in terms of evaluation. There are many ways to conform to requirements for documentation, background reading, research, or a thorough knowledge of the subject, and still produce a major creative effort.

Another option is to develop an entirely different set of guidelines or requirements for creative papers, where originality, use of unconventional sources, etc. are given major percentages of the final grade. Although I have never developed an alternate set of guidelines for creative papers, I have still received a large number of papers from students who have fulfilled all the basic requirements without restricting their imaginative flights. I'd like to share two such efforts with you at this time.

The first paper, written by Merrill Clark, came from an American Lit II class where all students wrote a paper on one of the

novels of Toni Morrison. Each student was also part of a group presentation of one of the five Morrison novels. Merrill chose *The Bluest Eye* and produced a brilliant television script for *All in the Family*, in which Archie discovers the novel lying on the coffee table, reads it, and later gets into a family discussion about it. Not only does Merrill nail the dialogue and opinions of Archie, Edith, Mike, and Gloria, but he also reveals his familiarity with the basic issues of the book and the secondary criticism. Merrill was able to use intext citation without disrupting the narrative flow of his script. I thought the paper was perfect, although Merrill was a bundle of nerves until he received his grade.

This opens up one brief aside about hovering over the progress of a creative project. Although I generally check the progress and process of conventional papers, when I know a student is working on something different, I don't violate the privacy or secrecy of that work. I believe the slogan "Genius at work." Many students want to preserve the element of surprise, and regard the opening night or unveiling of their work as somehow sacred. It's a performance that shouldn't be ruined by attending a dress rehearsal. I simply place a lot of trust in the student to work out his or her own small problems; I've rarely been disappointed with my decision to stay out of the way. No rough draft or notecard checks for them. That's part of the package of risk.

The second fragment of a paper, written by David Adams, "How Chaucer Anticipates Milton (A Mock Criticism)," was written in a World Lit I class. David had a talent for rhymed iambic pentameter verse, in addition to an almost religious adoration of John

Milton. David traced comparative themes in Chaucer and Milton, in a long mock epic poem of twelve pages, that contained an invocation, introduction, defense, evidence, summation, and sentence. He chose to use a system of numerical notation to cite both primary and secondary sources; this documentation did not get in the way, but did allow him to acknowledge the wide range of his reading. And once again, aside from seeing other poems David had written, I never saw a line of this poem until the day the paper was due.

Students who chose to write creative papers generally work harder and longer than others because the very self is at stake. But it is that commitment of self, the heart's passion or pain, the mind's light or dark humor, that drives the project to some momentous conclusion. If we use as our primary evaluation the ability of the paper to move us, to stir our own imagination as readers, then I believe we are responding at the appropriate level. If that magic doesn't happen, we can generally explain to the student in ways that will not crush or blight the imagination where or how the project could be improved. But in any case, let us remember applause. Any student who risks the safety of rules and order for a solo performance without a net deserves our heartfelt response. If the performance is only dress rehearsal quality, next time it may be opening night. With our encouragement and applause, we might just have the privilege of witnessing that performance.